

Allotment Games: case-study of a fan-based board-game production

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an artist-activist led project which combines the topic of urban garden/farming activism—encouraging people to think and act on the ability to gain a growing plot of land in the urban environment—and fan-based modification of a popular board game. The experience of project production and its participatory processes, including playing the game itself, all offer the example of 'openness': Illustration and design, use of commons and fan-based media, sharing of process. Overall, the game serves as a boundary object to encourage different people to share their various points of view on the topic.

Category

Making Openness

Keywords

Participatory Arts; Game Modification; Game Skinning; Open Design; Fan-based Game Communities; Open Games; Urban Gardening Activism; Allotment Culture; Boundary Objects; Urban Environment Activism in Finland.

1. INTRODUCTION

The case-study which gives example to this paper, Allotment Games or *Siirtolapuutarhapelit* in Finnish, draws together different contexts of allotment food production and fan-based game culture, into a creative agenda-based collaborative production [1].

This emerging project presents itself as a case-study for the Open Symposium [2] which gathers research and practice-based experiences on the topic of 'openness'. The Open Everything Project suggests that 'openness' can be understood as having the following qualities: Transparency, meaning that the components and processes involved in the production are accessible to learn from and understand; participatory, where people can be involved in the project in a substantial way, contributing and shaping its development; and further, it is editable, malleable and flexible for improvements, changes and evolvments beyond the original contributions [3].

2. BACKGROUND

This section gives short background of the different 'home-grown' production cultures which inform this case-study, and also introduces the example of popular board-game Carcassonne, as a key reference, and base-model for the production discussed.

2.1 Allotment food production

Allotment Gardens and growing plots in the urban context emerged with increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, shifting at different times between a matter of necessity and a leisure activity.

Social democratic principles influenced access for urban workers to growing plots in or near to the city, especially in Scandinavian and Finnish context. Home-grown urban food production has increased during periods of war or crisis, when the usual agricultural processes or imports were strained or diverted to other usage. For example, during the First and Second World Wars, UK, USA, Canadian and Australian governments all encouraged city dwellers to manage food rations, and contribute to the war effort by 'digging for victory' with vegetable, fruit and herb garden plots [4]. In post-war eastern Europe countries such as Poland and in Soviet Union, access to an family allotment (dacha) often accompanied mass apartment block living (figure 1).



Figure 1. Allotment garden in Czech Republic. Image from Wikipedia Commons.

In the recent decade, increasing public awareness about food security, critical opinions surrounding industrialised food distribution, climate change, and economical recession have all created a renaissance in interest and demand for urban gardening and food production. In the english-speaking world, references are made back to the 'Digging for Victory' campaign, this time against Climate Change [5].

Artists and activists, notably in urban Denmark and USA, have initiated projects in recent years raising awareness of the above issues, and intervening in urban space to do so [6], [7].

2.2 Fan-based game production

Since commercial board-games, role-playing games, and later computer games, became popular leisure entertainments from the 1970s onwards, enthusiastic game players have also been participants in fan-based development of popular games.

In the 1980s, when home computing in developed Western countries blossomed, code-sheets distributed in printed computer-user magazines encouraged amateur programming [8]. Enthusiasts could, by entering the code and compiling it, also learn about how the game code worked, and make adjustments. Later in the 1990s and early 2000s, the popularity of PC games, and in particular 3D 'first-person shooters' such as *Half-Life*, encouraged the developers to release tools for players to edit game levels and models, including the scripting language. Highly developed online communities, forums and skill-sharing tutorials have been made by fans and enthusiasts of such games [9]. There are two important fan-based adaptations in game design to recognise, as described below.

2.2.1 Game Design: Modding

Within game design and development, 'Modding' refers to the modification of the rules of the game to suit a different context, situation or, in the case of educational games, learning objective. According to Wey Tan, these adjustments are the most common 'evolutionary' way that new games develop [10].

2.2.2 Game Design: Skinning

On the other hand, 'Skinning' refers to maintenance of game rules, keeping the 'mechanics' of the original, but stripping the 'surface' and replacing with another. In the case of digital computer games this could be changing the visual graphics and audio, or more specifically the 3D-model texture graphics (often referred to as 'skins'). These new elements will then be used "to adapt the appearance, appeal and narrative context of actions to a specific objective and audience" [10].

2.3 Example of Carcassonne Board Game

Carcassonne is a German board-game designed by Klaus-Jürgen Wrede, published by Munich-based *Hans im Glück*, for 2-5 players, with an average game-play time of 30-90 minutes [11]. The game's visual style is inspired by the medieval-era walled city of Carcassonne, and its surrounding landscape in the South of France. The game's mechanics are based on tile placement: each player in rotation takes 'blind' a tile from the pool, and places it in a strategic location, respecting the rules of expanding the playing area or to score points. The aim of placement is to gain area control, where the player has a majority of units or influence in the expanded area. Points are scored during and at the end of the game-play, according to area control or influence on the landscape that is formed during play. The player with the most points at the end wins.

Carcassonne board-game is internationally popular, winning the 'Spiel des Jahre' (Game of the Year) award in 2001. Due to its popularity, it has inspired numerous expansions and clones, both official and unofficial [12], and has a strong fan support online [13]. The game has been 'modded' by fans to include new elements and rules [14]. Carcassonne has also been 'skinned' by

several fan game-designers, to make a new game called 'Pirates and Plunder' [15], changing the visual game rhetoric to be about pirates in a Caribbean island landscape.

3. CONCEPT AND PRODUCTION

In autumn 2008, I initiated a project to make a new 'skin' of Carcassonne, changing the visual rhetoric of the game-tiles to represent growing plots or allotment gardens in an urban landscape. The intention of this new version was to use the game, and the strategic landscape/territory accumulation within game-play, as a analogy for discussing similar strategies in the real life urban landscape. Choosing a board-game, with relatively simple rules (and ones that might be known already), where people gather physically round a table, face-to-face, was important to the ambition of having a low threshold for participation and conversation.

I invited 4 collaborators, who were also fans of Carcassonne game, to share the production process: Natalia Kulka and Wojtek Mejor, illustrator and graphic artist respectively, from Poland, Finnish illustrator Lotta Kauppi, and Simo Haanpää, an urban studies researcher and my collaborator in previous environmental art projects [16].

The context of 'Megapolis2024', a 1-day symposium raising urban environmental issues in Helsinki, was chosen as the ideal occasion to introduce and play in public, our version of the game. Organised yearly by volunteers within the Dodo non-profit association's membership, the theme of events in 2009 was 'Food and the City' [17], and included an activist 'growing plot' intervention in urban space.

Working between Helsinki and Warsaw, using free/spare time from other work and a small production budget (150€), we collaborated remotely over the internet, to produce several prototype versions of the new 'skinned' game, referred to from now on as *Siirtolapuutarhapelit*.

3.1 Identifying visual rhetoric and transfer

The original game of Carcassonne consists of 72 tiles, of which there are 24 unique design illustrations. Identifying these was assisted by the Carcassonne fan community on BoardGameGeek website, several of whom had produced tile-design documents from scans of the actual game tiles, detailing all the designs and their frequency [18].

Although not authorised by Carcassonne game-designer Wrede or publisher *Hans im Glück*, the tile distribution sheets make the original game mechanics transparent to fans and other game designers. Graphical duplicates of the original game tiles to print—which the copyright holder could interpret as pirate copies—can be found online, while other game enthusiasts have created graphical 2D/'flat' versions of the wooden 'follower/meeble' game-pieces, releasing them under Creative Commons licenses [19]. These fan-produced 'resources' make it possible to template, modify and multiply the game elements.

This first characteristic of openness—transparency—and our experience of playing the original game, allowed us (Haanpää, Mejor and myself) to debate the transfer of visual rhetoric from medieval landscape to urban farming, and place the results on our project wiki pages for public viewing [20].

As can be seen in Table 1, instead of area control gained in a medieval city, the player gained control of an allotment garden; Instead of controlling the road as a thief, the player gained an

important transport link between allotment and suburbs; Rather then claiming score from fields in Carcassonne, the player benefited from the area of suburbs surrounding an allotment. Likewise where Cloisters were a powerful influence (symbolically, and in scoring) within the Carcassonne game landscape, now community 'home-grown produce' markets are what relates the allotment to the urban space, and score the most points.

Table 1. Transfer of visual rhetoric from Carcassonne to Siirtolapuutarhapelit.

Carcassonne	Siirtolapuutarhapelit
Walled city tiles	Allotment gardens
Walls	Fence or hedge or open-ditch
Farms/Fields	Suburban areas
Roads with huts at crossings	Roads with pedestrian crossings
Monastery/Cloister	Community market for grown produce
Pennant in walled cities	Water taps
City tile with buildings	Children's playground
River extension	River or Motorway or Metro

3.2 Open illustration and publication online

The illustrators Mejr, Kulka and Kauppi were invited to develop the new visual rhetoric as they wished, in the end contributing a variety of different styles (see Figure 2).

Relating our project with the 'open game' design movement represented online [21], both Mejr and Kulka released their illustration designs for *Siirtolapuutarhapelit* on our wiki project pages to download as a 'print-n-cut' PDF, with Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike license [22]. This characteristic of openness, is aimed with keeping the materials editable, flexible, allowing others to remix and share the files.

Throughout the process of production, samples of illustrations, designs and task-notes were put online. It was our ambition to make transparent what—and how—we were doing: To encourage others to consider the topic; to show that it was possible to make skins of the original board-game for an educative or agenda-based purpose; to invite other illustrators, visual artists or designers to make one; to encourage people to support the project; and lastly, to attract people's interest to participate and come and play with us on the actual Megapolis2024 event.

3.3 Game-play at Megapolis2024

On September 26th, during the Megapolis2024 event, the *Siirtolapuutarhapelit* game was played 4 times in total: 2 scheduled and 2 ad-hoc in the afternoon [23]. On each occasion we played with 5 persons, 2 or 3 of whom were new persons (see Figure 3 for image of game-play).

Although in these debuts we did not ask for structured feedback or make interviews, casual conversation indicated that people joined us for various reasons: curiosity, fun, supporting the agenda or cause of allotment gardens, an interest in 'serious' or educational games; or a combination of these reasons. Following the game one of the participating game-players suggested modifying the game elements and rules, to include home-grown food exchange in the game between gardens and suburbs.



Figure 2. Samples of game tiles: Left-top & Left-bottom from original Carcassonne game; From Siirtolapuutarhapelit: Middle by Natalia Kulka; Right-top by Wojtek Mejr; Right-bottom by Lotta Kauppi.



Figure 3. Game-play at Megapolis2024 Symposium.

3.4 Potential future developments

The Allotment Games project is ongoing, open for further development and collaborations.

We have entered our project into the BoardGameGeek project pages, with the aim of communicating and exchanging with other grassroots game-designers [24].

Furthermore, we would like to invite both illustrators and non-professionals to develop further skins, promoting and raising awareness of the game. We aim to develop connections with allotment garden associations in Finland and abroad, other cultural organisations and institutions, and educational groups such as the Children's and Youth Gardening Association in Kumpula, Helsinki [25]. These processes will be initiated with the aim to involve others in discussion, feedback and development of the game.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In reflection, the *Siirtolapuutarhapelit* game, and its first play in public during Megapolis2024, suggests that this participatory way of working and engaging with others, is a good way to start discussion or research on a topic (in this case allotment gardens in the urban environment).

The game has been a boundary object [26] on different levels: Firstly for the illustrators, the open interpretation of new game elements allowed each to visualise the urban allotment landscape according to different cultural and urban contexts, to different potential viewers and ages. Secondly, for those who are willing to support and advocate for the topic, including the organisers of Megapolis2024 and gardening associations who work with an education agenda, the game is imagined as a potential tool for encouraging thought and discussion. To those who played, the game had different meanings and attractions. For those who encounter the designs and files online, hopefully there are materials and process available to modify, skin to develop the game further according to one's own wishes. Ideally, one might say, "Let's play and grow!"

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